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Letter to Editor

Addressing Psychoactive Drug Use in Iraq: Embracing Challenges and Seizing Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Drug use disorder is a global health issue and one of the leading causes of premature deaths and disability. There is an increase recognition of the need for a public health rather than criminal justice approach to mitigate the current health burden and prevent future health loss

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Drug use disorder is a global health issue and one of the leading causes of premature deaths and disability. There is an increase recognition of the need for a public health rather than criminal justice approach to mitigate the current health burden and prevent future health loss. The issue stems from social and environmental challenges that are beyond individual control. Treatment for illicit drug use is not simple; it is a chronic health condition that may require long-term treatment. Patients often have lifetime vulnerabilities. Additionally, limited access to treatment is a common challenge that also hinders the effectiveness of some of the interventions (1). Substance abuse negatively impacts society because of the loss of productivity, premature deaths, and high healthcare costs. There is also an increased cost associated with criminal justice and social welfare. Iraq faces many pressing public health issues, among them the emerging public

health crisis of substance abuse. Some reports indicate a correlation between substance use and communities experiencing higher unemployment rates and poverty, especially among adolescents and young adults.

Iraq has been consistently exposed to wide-scale traumatic experiences in the past half century, including successive wars since 1980, economic sanctions, organized violence, and terrorism. These experiences have created an unstable and unsafe environment that negatively impacts the psychological health of all Iraqi society. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been associated with an increased likelihood of early initiation into drug use by about 2-4 folds compared to youth without ACEs. Additionally, as the number of ACEs increases, the possibility of illicit drug use, addiction, and parenteral drug use increases (2).

Hypnotics, sedatives, and benzhexol are among the commonly abused substances in Iraq. Captagon, which is a psychostimulant substance, is a combination of amphetamine and theophylline, has been used widely in Iraq despite its production cessation. Psychoactive drugs in Iraq used to be among the legally available medicines, which were diverted from authorized health facilities to the black market or obtained without prescription from private pharmacies (3). However, some of them are being manufactured internally.

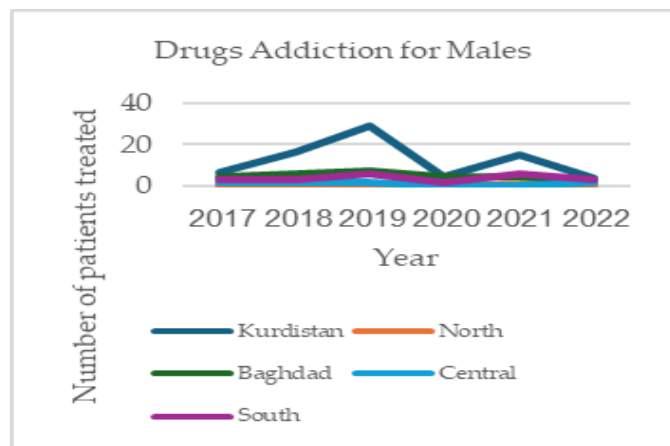


Figure 1. Rates of Treated Males for Drug Addiction per 100,000 of Population in Each Region of Iraq 2017-2022. Adopted from the annual statistical reports.

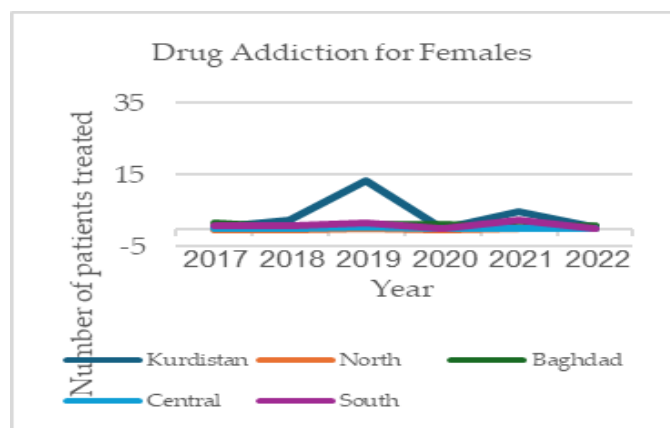


Figure 2. Rates of Treated Females for Drug Addiction per 100,000 of Population in Each Region of Iraq 2017-2022. Adopted from the annual statistical reports.

Data from the annual statistical reports from the Ministry of Health 2017-2022 showed the rates for drug addiction were significantly higher for males than females in all regions (4). Additionally, the Kurdistan region had particularly high rates of drug abuse. Moreover, the year of 2019 was significant was a particularly burdensome year. Iraq has recognized psychoactive drug use as a public health issue. However, its response is primarily punitive, as there are penalties for those who handle drugs (transport, trade, and use). Of those who appeared in front of a judge in the Iraqi courts because of drug use for the years 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2020, 65% of them were related to

personal drug use, while the rest of the cases were related to drug smuggling and trading (5). In the Kurdistan region, it was reported that from January to May 2024, at least 400 individuals were sentenced to drug-related charges, which is eight times more than in the previous years. Additionally, Iraq has a limited number of recovery and rehabilitation facilities, mainly located in Baghdad, resulting in limited treatment options. The United States has led a “war on drugs” for decades that has not been successful; it was based on bolstering the power of law enforcement and maximizing their budgets while cutting public health funding and diverting valuable resources away from the root causes of drug use.

Iraq needs collaborative and coordinated efforts from different official agencies to address the high unemployment and poverty. Additionally, the media should also actively participate in an antidrug campaign. Moreover, resources must be available for conducting research, implementing educational workshops, and establishing new rehabilitation centers. Funding must be allocated to each governorate to design its own prevention and treatment programs. A strong political will should lead a multidisciplinary approach where social work, economics, and addiction medicine intersect with public health to address psychoactive drug use.

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